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## Free Press in Mississippi is in Danger

Dick Sanders

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September 12, 1963

## "Comment" On WLBT

# Free Press In Mississippi Is In Danger

By DICK SANDERS

Hard-nose reporting of touchy and controversial stories in Mississippi — mainly those involving racial matters — and in particular those involving violence of whites against Negroes — is becoming increasingly rare.

And with reason, despite the damage that is being done to the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

There is a natural reticence to report incidents that make the state look bad. (we) Get enough bad publicity as it is.

There is also some fear of what will happen if you do report everything you see.

I have been guilty of dropping my camera on one occasion to keep from taking a picture of an officer doing something I didn't think he needed to do.

There have been times when we edited film to soften the impact, and certain kinds of violence we cannot show on grounds that it would incite further violence.

Another and potent factor in discouraging this kind of reporting is the \$100,000 lawsuits filed against Holmes County Editor Hazel Brannon Smith for her report on the fatal shooting of a Negro by two policemen.

In a similar suit by a former sheriff in 1954, the State Supreme Court finally ruled that Mrs. Smith had been accurate in her accounts, and that her editorial comment critical of the sheriff was proper and within the freedom of press guarantee.

Once again, the courts will have to decide on her accuracy and fairness.

Mrs. Smith is one of the few editors anywhere with guts to report what she sees and to comment as she believes, regardless of the consequences.

And she's about to be run out of business because of it.

It doesn't take many such suits to make most editors feel such a story isn't worth the risk.

Another case, a news agency reporter wrote about an alleged fraud being perpetrated at a state agency. The man involved sued for a large amount. They settled for a small amount, told the reporter in effect, "we know you were right and we could prove it in court," but it's easier this way.

How many more exposes will this reporter make with that kind of shaky front office backing?

We hear constant dire warnings of a communist take-over in America — a military dictatorship under Kennedy — corrupting, creeping socialism.

The immediate threat is at the local level, here and elsewhere, the stifling, intimidating, and strangling of the free press.

If the free press can be throttled effectively at home, as is being done in these and other instances, then certainly it can be throttled nationally.

But the first and immediate danger is at home. And this cornerstone freedom will be lost — some day — if the people don't start now to demand all the truth and then back those reporters and editors who will dare to give it to them.